DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 827 EC 303 700

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TITLE Help and Fair Play for College Learning Disabled Students.
PUB DATE 12 Jan 94
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at a St. Norbert College Faculty Conference (De Pere, WI, January 12, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; College Students; Coping; Higher Education; *Learning Disabilities; *Learning Strategies; Student Characteristics; Student College Relationship; *Student Needs; *Student Personnel Services; Study Skills; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the characteristics, achievements, attitudes, and needs of college students with learning disabilities (LD). The most definitive and frequent description of LD is that there is a significant discrepancy between measured intelligence and academic achievement. College students with LD often possess high degrees of motivation and persistence as a result of coping with these special challenges. Many have identified specific study strategies that work for them, including studying in quiet places, following a schedule, subvocalizing their reading, and purchasing previously highlighted textbooks. Seldom used strategies include using audiotaped textbooks or tape-recording lectures. However, virtually all college students with LD report that they desire and need emotional, social, and academic support such as a support group; academic advising that takes into account their limitations; clear syllabi; tutorial services; and provision of adaptations in test format or time allowed. Among examination procedures likely to minimize these students' success are "pop" quizzes and in-class examinations that require extended and first-time reading prior to writing. Faculty typically express concerns about lack of services for students with LD, false claims of LD to mask poor student preparation, and the increased time demands that LD students require of faculty. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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HELP AND FAIR PLAY FOR COLLEGE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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ERIC, Dec. 14, 1994

The following paragraph is an abstract of the article submitted to ERIC and titled, "Help and Fair Play for College Learning Disabled Students."

Presentation of this paper occurred at a St. Norbert College Faculty Conference on January 12, 1994. The college has been programmatically supportive of learning disabled students since 1987. This paper, later revised to article form, features research and commentary on college learning disabled student achievement with and without programmatic support. Key faculty advisors to LD students produced several papers for self-assessment and possible wider distribution. Main sections by title include, "LD College Students: Coping and Succeeding," "College Assistance," and "Faculty Concerns." The increased presence of LD students on college and university campuses will require significant and creative physical energy by faculty and staff persons to meet LD student needs. Assistance to this worthy non-traditional student population will not come on the cheap for anyone.

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HELP AND FAIR PLAY FOR COLLEGE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

Among my campus responsibilities is that of academic advisor to students. I also teach courses related to Exceptional Education Needs of children and adolescents. Given these frequently exercised tasks, I feel qualified to write in a formal and personal way about needs of some of my college student advisees who happen to be Learning Disabled.

Forty-nine percent of exceptional education youth from 6 to 21 are classified as Learning Disabled (Hardman, 1993). Ten percent of children and adolescents manifest real LD symptoms. (Lavoie, R., 1988) Their sheer numbers should cause college course educators to ask not only who they are. Consider a graduate student named Deborah who wrote:

> "I am LD - I learn differently. Rather than read a text-book, I listen to a recording of the text. When a recording is unavailable, I rely on a reader. Rather than take notes, I photocopy another student's notes or tape the lecture. Rather than write the complete answer to an essay question, I write a rough outline, (or record my answer on a cassette tape)." (Hardman, 1993)

Prior to the 1960s, Debra might have been labeled "remedial" "underachieving," "brain injured," "neurologically

deficient" or "emotionally handicapped." In 1963, Sam Kirk introduced the phrase, "specific learning disabilities," (Kirk, 1963, in Hardmann, p. 503) and that original concept remains in use today. But back to Deborah, for a moment.

> "I focus on my strengths...and using my strengths, I compensate for my deficits. I am not an Attention Deficit Disorder. I am not a label! I am a person who learns differently, a person who approaches learning and living differently." (Hardman, 1993)

Learning Disabilities, what are they? The question challenges teachers and scholars. Imagine yourselves in a chamber of mirrors with each mirror reflecting differently. Pursuit of consistent LD descriptions is like stepping into that place of funny mirrors. In technical language, assorted conditions may include:

- a heterogeneous group of perceptual processing disorders.
- intrinsic difficulties in listening, speaking, writing, reasoning, and mathematical functions.
- a condition that persists across the life span.
- a condition often accompanied by deficits in self-regulatory behavior, social perception, and social interaction.
- a condition that may occur with other disabling conditions including "insufficient and inappropriate instruction."

Other descriptions include: organizational difficulties, memory, oral and written expression challenges, diminished reading rates, and fine-motor deficits causing "laborious note-taking and poor

handwriting." (Shaywitz and Shaw, 1988) Also, social skills may fall below the norm meaning that certain LD students' responses and questions may seem irrelevant, inappropriate or ill-advised in formal classroom or informal conversation contexts.

The most definitive and frequent description of LD challenges is that they represent a significant discrepancy between measured intelligence and academic achievement. LD students can be very bright, but receive low grades because of conditions mentioned above. Such conditions may mask good thinking and impressive talents (Shaywitz and Shaw, 1988). But also important is most research indicating that among the 13% of Learning Disabled high school graduates who enroll in four year colleges or universities, "...reading and academic scores tend to be low, and this inevitably results in difficulty reading the texts required by College courses." (Bender, 1994) Researchers document chronic short-term memory problems and lack of metacognitive skills where planning and staying aware of academic goals are difficult. For example. LD students, after reading for 30 minutes, may close the book, feel good and be unaware or unconcerned that little is remembered or understood. Non-disabled but inattentive students are more likely to catch themselves at it, and know that little has been gained.

LD College Students: Coping and Succeeding:

College LD students often possess a special mixture of motivation, perseverance, and intelligence. They've made it through the rain, with many struggling every step of the way.

Consider the case of an LD graduate student, Dean. In high school, he was tracked into vocational classes. He writes:

> "Why couldn't I have been taught to type instead of write? Why couldn't I have dictated and had someone transcribe it? Why didn't anyone encourage me to find my own way of reading instead of trying to teach me phonics, which I never did understand? Why didn't anyone teach me how to manage my time, knowing that it takes me longer to read something than it does everyone else? Why didn't anyone encourage me to go to college instead of deciding that I should be a carpenter or mechanic? I always wanted to teach, but no one listened."

Dean completed his master's degree in biology and Special Education. He received A's and B's throughout college, except for a C in poetry. Dean recently wrote, "I will teach, and won't let my students feel as dumb as I was made to feel." (Gearheart, Mullen, and Gearheart, 1993)

LD college students can survive without special campus support. When they accomplish this, it's usually because they discover and refine techniques that help them compensate in some fashion for the challenges (Bender, 1994). In a study of students with "...persistent visual, auditory, and academic skills deficits," at a midwestern university without LD program support, successful coping efforts were described (Cohen, 1988).

- 92% reported studying in quiet places and at quiet times.
- 76% devised and followed daily and weekly schedules.

- 52% planned or weighted their work-loads across several days.

- 84% reported regular class attendance and completion of all homework "...to compensate for expected poor quiz and test performances."

Additional strategies included: reading in distraction free places, subvocalizing(whispered reading), and purchasing previously highlighted textbooks. Help from professors and teaching assistants, when available, was highly valued (Cohen, 1988). Listening and writing challenges required continual use of dictionaries, secretarial spelling lists, and use of short easy-to-spell words in compositions. Additional strategies, in order of access, included: having all papers proof-read by others, tape-recording lectures, asking for extra test-writing time, asking for test-readers and securing taped textbook passages. Computer use and color coding passages for difficulty were strategies also mentioned. Eleven percent of the students audited classes before taking them for credit (Cohen, 1988).

Math learning disabled students reported reliance on tutors, friends in class, and "...the maladaptive strategy" of avoiding math courses." (Cohen, 1988) Math students also sought extra test-taking time, access to test-readers, and individualized test administrations (Cohen, 1988).

Also important are strategies assumed to be used by LD college students more than they actually are. "For example, only 3 of 25 students had ever tried audiotaped textbooks and 9 of the

25 had ever tape-recorded a lecture." (Cohen, 1968)

College advisor and teacher awareness of used(and seldom used)coping strategies described above is necessary preparation for successful advising and teaching of Learning Disabled college students. College created workshops for academic and counseling personnel are coming into increased use for providing very necessary advantages to LD college students.

College Assistance:

Many LD students will not succeed in college without social and academic assistance. Virtually all college LD students report need and desire for emotional and social support (Bender, 1994). Weekly interaction or support groups that empower peer conversation problem sharing and solution brainstorming can be offered by a student support center. Peer assisted goal focus and problem solving may be the most valuable social and emotional outcomes of such campus programs.

Attention to academic needs is also crucial. Academic support personnel can assist LD advisees in identifying course requirements and options, and steer them into courses and schedules that will enhance their talents. Often LD students are enrolled in courses where required work exaggerates limitations. A writing disabled student assigned to large composition classes would be an example. This forces the instructor to devise special techniques, often without guidance. Specifically appointed academic advisors for college LD students can wisely advise course teachers about recommended techniques

Sophisticated academic support is already practiced in hundreds of two and four year institutions and in graduate schools where faculty and professional staff contribute some or all of the following kinds of assistance (Lundeberg M., and Svien, K., 1988).

- Availability of well-composed syllabi that list major objectives, along with administration or completion dates of quizzes, tests, and assignments.

- Advice about tutoring and other assistance options. Even better is actual matching of tutors with LD tutees.

- Availability of library-use workshops, the sooner the better. Even the brightest of LD students may have avoided use of library and computer resources in high school.

- Allowance, by faculty, of test and assignment options, meaning that some kind of project, performance, device, video-tape, portfolio, field experience, or other, may be done in place of expository papers, or written test performances; and for equal credit. Written test scores may be one of the weakest predictors of future career success. Yet we rely on them as if they were the strongest (Sternberg, R., 1984).

- Provision of increased test-completion time and/or test-readers. The importance of such arrangements can't be stressed enough. Numerous studies indicate that at least 50% of college LD students report lack of time for and "...inaccurate reading of exams..." as major sources of poor test and course grades.

- Permission for audio or video taping of classroom lectures

and discussions provided.

- Availability of lecture abstracts, paper copied chalkboard designs, and transparencies for distribution.

- Special guidance offered in course selection and registration complexities.

- Provision of no-cost tutoring on a daily, biweekly, or weekly basis. Special care should be taken in selection of student tutors for LD students.

- Identification of college faculty able to and interested in assisting learning disabled students.

- Instruction of LD students in effective learning associated with work-time planning, study habits, and metacognitive strategies.

Educators should be aware that certain examination procedures are often incompatible with LD student success in academic settings. They include:

- Use of surprise or "pop" quizzes. One of the best LD coping strategies is to know approximate testing schedules in advance and allocate extensive time to get ready. Frequency of scored surprise quizzes across courses wipes out that readiness strategy.

- In-class examinations that require extended and first-time reading prior to writing. Examples are lengthy essay questions or multiple-choice items with lengthy stems and numerous complicated option choices. Lengthy matching sections create similar problems. The challenge of such exercises isn't for lack

of LD student knowledge mastery or high level thinking sophistication, but lack of time to both comprehend questions then compose written answers. Distribution of complicated questions or problems in advance, followed by using some of those in an examination, creates better test readiness potential, especially for LD college students.

Provision of the above, and additional kinds of guidance, should be offered during the normal academic semesters and in special summer on-campus institutes, preferably to in-coming freshmen students. Dalke and Schmitt(1987) identify and describe such model summer institutes at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Other exemplars familiar to this writer are very effective academic mastery centers and institutes firmly established at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin.

Faculty Concerns:

If we recruit LD students, we should provide necessary resources to them. Public law and Section 504 demand it (Parks, et. al., 1987). More importantly, so do the ethical mission statements about respect for diversity needs composed by all colleges and university Admissions, Academic, and Student Support Offices.

Two college LD program directors at the College of St. Catherine, in St. Paul, MN, have described faculty and staff dialogues at workshops they conduct (Lundeberg, and Svien, 1988). They report that most faculty claim to know LD students and

express concern for them. But teaching professors also want guidance for teaching College LD students. Some also express concern that students may plead LD to mask lack of preparation or motivation. Faculty should recommend documented evidence of specific LD conditions. The existence of a special center where LD college students can declare need for assistance and where skillful personnel can assess LD conditions and report them to concerned faculty is crucial in meeting faculty desires for teaching guidance and LD identification.

Faculty also express concern at the high cost, in time and energy, that assisting growing populations of worthy LD students will require. Given traditional challenges related to tenure, promotions, research, collegiality, community collaborations, and other career conditions, faculty should not be censured for expression of career and promotion concerns when pressed for allocation of extended time and energies to LD college students. We should support such faculty and academic staff concerns and the conviction that if colleges recruit and accept promising LD students, provision for their necessary achievement conditions should be made. Arrival of LD students at college and university campuses will require significant and creative and physical energy by college faculty and staff persons to meet the needs of these students. Assistance to this worthy non-traditional student population won't come on the cheap for anyone.

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